



The Human Services Workforce Initiative

MULTIPLE WORKFORCES

Through a Kaleidoscope:

*How the Evolving Field of Workforce Development
Impacts the Experiences of Frontline Workers
in Three Cities*



Prepared by
Public/Private Ventures

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Frontline Workers in Three Cities***



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We thank Cornerstones for Kids for their support of this work but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Cornerstones for Kids.

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Cornerstones for Kids Introduction

The Human Services Workforce Initiative (HSWI) is focused on the frontline workers serving vulnerable children and families. HSWI's premise is that human services matter. Delivered well, they can, and do, positively impact the lives of vulnerable children and families, often at critical points in their lives.

We believe that the quality of the frontline worker influences the effectiveness of services they deliver to children and families. If workers are well-trained and supported, have access to the resources that they need, possess a reasonable workload, and are valued by their employers, it follows that they will be able to effectively perform their jobs. If, however, they are as vulnerable as the children and families that they serve, they will be ineffective in improving outcomes for children and families.

Unfortunately, all indications today are that our frontline human services workforce is struggling. In some instances poor compensation contributes to excessive turnover; in others an unreasonable workload and endless paperwork render otherwise capable staff ineffective; and keeping morale up is difficult in the human services fields. It is remarkable that so many human services professionals stick to it, year after year.

HSWI's mission is to work with others to raise the visibility of, and sense of urgency about, workforce issues. Through a series of publications and other communications efforts we hope to

- Call greater attention to workforce issues
- Help to describe and define the status of the human services workforce
- Disseminate data on current conditions
- Highlight best and promising practices
- Suggest systemic and policy actions that can make a deep, long-term difference

In this paper, Public/Private Ventures reports on a study of workforce development workers in Houston, Philadelphia, and San Jose. The report identifies workers' positions, duties, salaries, backgrounds, and experiences; the range of workforce institutions and approaches; the challenges that these organizations face in recruiting and retaining qualified staff; and frontline workers' training needs and access to training. The authors conclude with recommendations for supporting the continuing education and professional development of frontline workers, especially those who are disadvantaged and those in community-based organizations, and for attracting new talent to the field through fellowships and certification and degree programs.

Additional information on the human services workforce, and on HSWI, is available at www.cornerstones4kids.org.

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Through a Kaleidoscope: How the Evolving Field of Workforce Development Impacts the Experiences of Frontline Workers in Houston, Philadelphia and San José

INTRODUCTION

New technology, international trade, and deregulation have led to major changes for American businesses and the people who work for them. The American job market now offers less security than it did a generation ago, the wage gap continues to grow, and those with lower skills find it increasingly difficult to earn a living wage.¹ Policies that have historically shaped services for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged have also undergone rapid change with two major reforms, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)²—now a decade old—having been made in the federal approach to workforce and welfare programs.

Yet little attention has been devoted to understanding the roles, qualifications, and challenges of frontline workers—those charged with the tremendous responsibility of connecting disadvantaged job seekers to employment—who are at the nexus of changes in the economy and in the workforce policy landscape. In 2005, Cornerstones for Kids approached Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) to help fill this gap and to provide a picture of frontline workers involved in workforce development employment and training programs. As part of its look at frontline workers across a number of human services—including child care, child welfare, youth development, juvenile justice and employment—Cornerstones seeks to understand how the experiences of these workers affect the quality of services they provide to children and families and how the human services fields help recruit, develop, and retain a quality workforce.

To document the experiences of frontline workers, P/PV interviewed and visited cities that were home to representative programs of a diverse group of agencies and organizations. We began by mapping the workforce systems of 16 cities and then selected three of them for further and deeper investigation: Houston, Philadelphia, and San José. Together these cities represent the variety of organizations involved in workforce development and also the diversity of environments in which frontline workers operate.

Focusing primarily on the federal WIA and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) adult programs, we interviewed more than 40 executives, administrators, and senior managers in the three cities, held 13 focus groups with more than 100 frontline staff and managers, and administered a survey to 125 frontline workers. We also conducted one-on-one interviews with

¹ Kusnet, David, et al. 2006. *Talking Past Each Other: What Everyday Americans Really Think (and Elites Don't Get) About the Economy*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

² The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act created TANF, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, a federal block grant program to help move recipients into work and turn welfare into a program of temporary assistance. The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 provided the framework for a national workforce development and employment system designed to meet the needs of job seekers and employers.

several frontline staff and managers. These studies were undertaken to help us understand workers' positions, duties, salaries, backgrounds, and experiences; the range of workforce institutions and approaches; the challenges that these organizations face in recruiting and retaining qualified staff; and frontline workers' training needs and access to training. Through focus groups and one-on-one interviews we asked frontline workers to share their experiences. While our findings cannot be considered representative of the entire field, they begin to paint a picture of frontline workers and the challenges they face.

This report examines how the variety of organizations that provide workforce development services have fostered variation in workers' qualifications, pay, and benefits and how efforts to consolidate the workforce system's many funding streams have required staff to work collaboratively across organizational lines—oftentimes across differences in pay, benefits, and organizational cultures. We examine how the burden of meeting unforgiving performance targets and sudden and inconsistent cuts in funding have weakened workers' opportunities for long-term employment and professional growth. We also examine how the demands for responsiveness to business needs require workers to learn and apply an entirely new set of skills.

These findings are presented in the context of the history and implementation of federal WIA and TANF workforce policies and the ways in which local workforce systems and frontline workers' experiences have been shaped by several elements of these policies: the drive to consolidate funding streams, the pay-for-performance environment, the rise of a “Work First” approach, and the emerging demand to connect workforce services more closely to employers' needs.

We also outline a common set of challenges shared by those on the frontlines of the nation's workforce system. In workers' own voices, the report examines how they felt handicapped by the demand to serve large numbers of high-need customers, overwhelmed by detailed policy mandates on how their jobs should be done, and frustrated by the nation's Work First agenda, which they felt stymied their ability to prepare customers to get and keep jobs. We end with recommendations on ways that the performance of frontline workers—and consequently the prospects of those they serve—can be strengthened.

THE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT FIELD—A BRIEF BACKGROUND

The workforce development field as we know it has emerged from a disparate set of social programs and policies. In fact, the term “workforce development” has only become common parlance in the past 10 years. Some date the field’s beginning back to the Great Depression, when 25 percent of the labor force lost jobs. To cope with the hardship that many families faced, President Roosevelt’s New Deal instituted Employment Service (ES), a system of public employment offices throughout the country, and made assistance for needy individuals a federal responsibility. With his 1935 signing of the Social Security Act, Roosevelt added provisions for welfare assistance to the “deserving poor,” and the 1936 Aid to Families with Dependent Children act (AFDC) provided cash assistance to single mothers with young children and many who were later widowed or deserted because of the war. The 1996 PRWORA eliminated this federal entitlement, replacing it with a five-year lifetime limit on cash assistance and launching a large-scale effort to get welfare recipients quickly into jobs. Known as Work First, this concept is a defining aspect of today’s workforce development system.

The 1944 GI Bill of Rights, which paid for returning war veterans to attend any college or training program of their choice, is viewed by others as the first workforce development legislation. With two million veterans using the GI Bill to access higher education, the country’s workforce was “enriched by 450,000 engineers, 238,000 teachers, 91,000 scientists, 67,000 doctors, 22,000 dentists, and another million college-educated men and women.”³ This newly skilled workforce in turn strengthened the national economy. The need for even greater numbers of qualified workers led to President Truman’s creation of a network of community colleges around the country that would charge little or no tuition, offer comprehensive programming and serve local communities.⁴ Today, a network of 11,000 community colleges, serving more than 11 million students, is a critical player in the workforce field. Many community colleges now operate short-term employment programs, for example, working with public and private agencies alike to establish career-pathways programs for disadvantaged workers.

The field’s beginnings are also rooted in the social programs created during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. In fact, the Kennedy Administration’s Manpower Development and Training Act (MDTA)—the great-grandfather of the 1998 WIA—established a role for local government in meeting the needs of adult workers, the poor, and youth by setting up “second chance” programs outside the formal education system. The Economic Opportunity Act, passed two years later, established many programs (including Job Corps) and offered the first training programs for young women on welfare.

Based on the belief that a job is the best social program, connecting people to employment has in recent years emerged as a central strategy for dealing with some of society’s most pervasive problems. Welfare benefits are tied to participation in work activity; ex-prisoners are linked to

³ Retrieved from <http://veterans.house.gov/benefits/legacy/html>.

⁴ Drury, Richard L. 2003. “Community Colleges in America: A Historical Perspective.” *Inquiry*, 8 (1), Virginia Community College System. Retrieved 11/06 from <http://www.vccaedu.org/inquiry/inquiry-spring2003/i-81-drury.htm>.

transitional employment as a way to draw them away from crime; jobs are viewed as a strategy for improving life in public housing projects; and adult basic education and English as a Second Language policies have targeted employment as a critical outcome. WIA, while allowing flexibility at the state and local levels, is the nation's first attempt to integrate workforce services through a system of nationwide One-Stops.

CHALLENGES FACING FRONTLINE WORKERS IN THE FIELD

With roots in the New Deal, the postwar economic boom, and the unrest of the 1960s, the workforce field today has become a loose conglomerate of the institutions, policies, approaches, and disciplines that each of these legislative threads has spawned—despite WIA’s efforts at consolidation. The work lives of frontline staff have been shaped by the diverse policies and requirements inherent in legislative efforts to address a range of social and economic development issues:

- The wide variety of workforce development organizations in the field has created a range of pay and benefits. Qualifications desired by various organizations for frontline workers tend to differ as well. Core functions, however, are the same irrespective of the type of organization, although the ways in which the agencies structure these functions vary less by type of agency, reflecting instead the organizations’ overall approach.
- Efforts at integrating services funded across a range of government agencies result in close collaboration by staff from varying types of organizations. This causes tensions as organizational cultures and goals collide and differences in pay and benefits become apparent, a situation that makes it necessary for workers to cultivate skills in collaboration and conflict management.
- The focus on getting job seekers quickly into jobs leaves many workers reporting that they do not have the tools to meet the needs of their clients. Additionally, the performance-based environments in which frontline workers operate have put pressure on workers to meet specific quantitative targets, resulting in many regarding their work as somewhat of a numbers game.
- There have been significant declines in workforce development funding during the past two decades. Unstable funding results in an insecure work environment for frontline workers and contributes to high turnover.
- The nation’s growing focus on economic development and global competitiveness has created an urgent need for frontline workers to serve (and understand) business customers as well as job seekers.

WORKING IN A FRAGMENTED FIELD

Frontline workers look out at a workforce system that is a complex and confusing array of funding sources, each with its own target populations, restrictions, and outcomes measures. As far back as 1973 and the passage of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA)—part of the federal government’s response to the urban riots of the late 1960s—there has been concern about the large number of separate and distinct federal job training programs. Two decades later, as Congress considered what would replace CETA’s successor, the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), there was still a fragmented array of programs—163 by 1995,

as documented by the General Accounting Office.⁵ When WIA finally became law, one of its key intents was to streamline services and encourage programs and providers to co-locate, coordinate, and integrate services in a single system of One-Stops. Perhaps most significantly, the Act mandated that the Department of Labor's Employment Service be delivered through the One-Stops. The newly enacted TANF program, however, was a voluntary partner—encouraged but not mandated to be a part of the new One-Stop system, resulting in wide variation in local systems.

For frontline workers in Philadelphia, Houston, and San José, the question of consolidating funding streams plays out quite differently. In 1995, Texas passed legislation that consolidated 24 workforce programs across 10 state agencies to create a One-Stop model of integrated service.⁶ Job seekers—whether TANF recipients, dislocated workers, or employees seeking to move to a better position—are served in a system in which program labels such as TANF, WIA, or Food Stamps are not addressed in front-room service delivery. One-Stop staff serve customers according to employment needs rather than program eligibility, thus shielding customers' funding status from most staff, customers, and other individuals at the Centers. Financial aid counselors take on the “back-office” responsibility of aligning customer eligibility and services to particular funding streams.

In Philadelphia, while both TANF and WIA pass through a single administrative entity, the Philadelphia Workforce Development Corporation (PWDC), services are offered in parallel systems. Frontline workers from the Department of Labor and Industry and from PWDC (in a dual role as both operator and fiscal-agency) deliver WIA services through the city's seven CareerLink One-Stop Centers. Frontline workers from both nonprofit and for-profit agencies (sometimes in partnership) offer TANF services in a newly established network of Employment Advancement and Retention Network (EARN) centers that serve as community-based “One-Stop” shops for welfare recipients. This model was piloted from early implementation studies in which data showed that welfare recipients who continued to receive benefits were “residentially segregated and socially isolated.”⁷ While there has been some collaboration between CareerLink and TANF employment and training programs, the state has essentially created a TANF system that mirrors that of the WIA CareerLink.

Similarly, in San José, frontline workers deliver WIA and TANF services in two parallel systems. TANF recipients get job assistance from staff at Employment Connection Centers in the county social service office—which also serves businesses. City employees, along with frontline workers of subcontracted agencies, deliver WIA services through the work²future (formerly the Silicon Valley Workforce Investment Network) system. Work²future and Employment Connection staff collaborate periodically to develop job leads, coordinate job fairs, and provide on-the-job training opportunities for some TANF participants.

⁵ Morra, Linda, et al. 1995. *Multiple Employment Training Programs. Information Crosswalk on 163 Employment Training Programs*. General Accounting Office, Health, Education and Human Services Division.

⁶ O'Shea, Dan and Christopher T. King. 2004. *The Workforce Investment Act in Eight States: State Case Studies from a Field Network Evaluation: Volume Two*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas at Austin.

⁷ Michalopoulos, Charles, et al. 2003. *The Project on Devolution and Urban Change, Summary Report. Welfare Reform in Philadelphia Implementation, Effects, and Experiences of Poor Families and Neighborhoods*. New York, NY: MDRC.

Privatization Fuels the Diversity of Players in the Field

Government contracting of welfare, social service, and workforce programs to private agencies has long been carried out in an attempt to provide cost-effective, quality service without the bureaucracy often seen as characteristic of the public sector. Before the New Deal, most social services were delivered by private religious or secular organizations. After the Depression, the government increased its funding for private social services, and funding grew dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s.⁸ Workforce is no exception; both TANF and the WIA have furthered this trend toward privatization. Today's frontline workers may be employed by community colleges, private and unionized nonprofit agencies, for-profit companies, proprietary schools, and state and local government agencies. For example, Philadelphia engages a great number and variety of workforce providers, with frontline workers in for-profit, small and large nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and academic institutions. Two of the city's seven WIA One-Stop centers are housed at and operated by community-based organizations. Workers who deliver TANF employment and training come from the Department of Public Welfare as well as a variety of community college, nonprofit, community-based, and for-profit organizations.

In Houston, "The WorkSource" One-Stop center operations are currently subcontracted to for-profit and nonprofit agencies, including a faith-based organization, a national for-profit company, and the city's former Private Industry Council. San José's WIA one-stop system is operated and managed by staff of the city's economic development department, which subcontracts some services to for-profit and non-profit partners. TANF employment and training services are delivered through the county-based social service office.

Table 1

TYPES OF WIA AND TANF PROVIDERS IN THE THREE CITIES BEING STUDIED

TYPE OF WORKFORCE PROVIDERS								
	Nonprofit	Community-Based Organization	Faith-Based Organization	Community College	Proprietary School	Union	For-profit	Public Agency
WIA								
Houston	X	X	X				X	X
Philadelphia	X	X	X					X
San José	X	X		X			X	X
TANF								
Houston	X	X	X				X	X
Philadelphia	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
San José								X

⁸ Winston, Pamela, et al. 2002. *Privatization of Welfare Services: A Review of the Literature*. Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

Still, Frontline Workers Share Core Functions Across Organizational Types

Even with the variety of types of organizations involved in the field, in both WIA- and TANF-funded programs, frontline workers carried out a similar set of functions in all three cities. They administered a range of career and basic-skills-assessment tests, counseled individuals about potential career prospects, provided guidance on how to approach job searches, referred candidates to specific employers, and referred those in need of additional services to appropriate support services. Some frontline workers conducted group trainings in résumé prep, interviewing skills, and how to be successful on the job. Others conducted basic or job-specific skills training in a range of occupations from customer-service to certified nurse assistant or taught classes that could lead to an educational credential such as a GED or associate's degree. Frontline workers also followed up with employed customers, encouraged them to stay on the job or return to the program for skills upgrading, or gave them help in finding alternative employment. Many frontline workers spent hours on the phone reaching out to potential employers or meeting one-on-one with local businesses to find out about developments and needs in the local labor market as well as specific job opportunities.

Table 2 provides a sample of frontline worker positions and a summary of their key functions.

Table 2
EXAMPLES OF STAFF ROLES IN THE THREE CITIES

	TITLE	FUNCTION
HOUSTON	Greeter	Provide initial customer contact and assistance.
	Personal Services Representative	Help customers who are not yet ready to work or to look for work identify and overcome barriers to working.
	Employment Counselor	Provide job search guidance and career advice.
PHILADELPHIA	CareerLink Supervisor (public agency)	Assist employers with recruitment and hiring needs, assess job seekers, and conduct job search workshops.
	Staffing Specialist (nonprofit)	Evaluate candidates for open job orders. Develop and implement comprehensive strategies for bringing multiple job seekers together to meet employer needs.
	Job Readiness Coordinator (for-profit)	Assess job readiness skills of participants. Teach motivational/attitudinal course, job readiness skills related to attainment of pre-employment/work maturities and competencies, and job search skills.
SAN JOSÉ	Social Service Manager (public agency)	Provide technical resources to staff for successful performance of their jobs. Initiate recommendations for programs to meet community needs. Assure compliance with federal, state, and county mandates.
	Supervisor, Program Performance (for-profit)	Supervise the day-to-day operations of an employment services program.
	Research Assistant (for-profit)	Collect and maintain grant and customer information for reporting and compliance purposes.

However, Approaches and Staff Titles Are Different

In two of the three cities, although many core functions were similar, job titles varied across organizations. Workers with titles such as employment specialist, job developer, account executive, or staffing specialist performed similar functions, but the titles reflected organizations' thinking and approach to the job. Traditional job placement functions (e.g., determining clients' job needs, talking to businesses, filling job orders, etc.) might fall under the title *employment specialist* in an organization that wants staff and clients to be singularly focused on employment as the desired outcome. How organizations structured functions also varied considerably. Many organizations assigned staff to specialized functions; for example, some staff worked only with employers, while others worked with job seekers. In other cases, staff took on responsibilities across several functions—conducting initial assessments with job seekers and reaching out to employers to find appropriate employment opportunities, for example. Other organizations established teams that were composed of staff representing specialized functions;

as a team, the workers took clients through a complete process, from initial assessment to placement and retention.

Houston was somewhat of an exception to this variation. The WorkSource system, built on a franchise model, demands uniformity in the manner in which all contractors operate. Staff titles, functions, qualifications, and performance standards are outlined by the Houston-Galveston Area Council, the WorkSource's oversight agency. All organizations that are contracted to deliver services within the WorkSource system are expected to adhere to these guidelines. Thus, within each of the One-Stop system's two operating divisions—Resident Services (RSD) and Employer Services (ESD)—staff across centers play the same roles, share the same titles, and follow the same procedures and guidelines. While some differences still exist across contractors, the WorkSource is branded as a single system.

Organizations in Philadelphia and San José in some cases had workforce contracts with a number of different funding agencies to perform a similar range of services with different performance measures and payment points. Some organizations established contract-based teams to manage workflow. Others organized frontline workers by functions; for example, the same staff provided job placement services to clients in all workforce contracts. In one nonprofit agency, these functions were combined into a matrix-management approach that had some staff responsible for overall management of a specific contract (e.g., youth or TANF), while other managers oversaw core functions (e.g., operations, performance management, job placement, and case management) across all contracts.

Organizations Also Offer Different Pay and Benefits

Accounting for regional differences, there was very little variation in compensation packages across the three cities; however, there were differences in pay and benefits between the types of organization within each city. Using data from the survey and interviews with program managers, we found that staff working at for-profits or large nonprofits were paid roughly comparable salaries. Staff employed by public agencies were typically paid less but had more holiday and vacation time. Not surprisingly, based on interviews with executives and staff, frontline workers employed by small community-based organizations were paid the least and had fewer benefits. Staff in some of the larger private organizations were sometimes eligible for bonuses—usually based on set performance targets for client placement and retention—that could add up to \$4,000 to annual salaries.

In all three cities, because workers of private and public agencies often worked side by side, tensions could arise because of differences in pay and benefits; for example, private agencies might choose to offer bonuses for performance, while public agencies were prohibited from doing so. Even among private agencies that were co-located, differences in pay, bonus structures, and vacation time could create tensions among workers. They also created difficulties for management, who might have to deal with staffers jumping ship to work for the agency that offered higher pay or better benefits.

Table 3**EXAMPLES OF STAFF ROLES WITH SALARIES**

	TITLE	FUNCTION	TYPICAL SALARY / RANGE
HOUSTON	Greeter	Provide initial customer contact and assistance.	\$28,000-\$36,000
	Personal Services Representative	Help customers who are not yet ready to work or to look for work identify and overcome barriers to working.	\$25,000-\$46,000
	Employment Counselor	Provide job search guidance and career advice	\$26,000-\$48,000
PHILADELPHIA	CareerLink Supervisor (public agency)	Assist employers with recruitment and hiring needs; assess job seekers; and conduct job search workshops.	\$38,475
	Staffing Specialist (nonprofit)	Evaluate candidates for open job orders. Develop and implement comprehensive strategies.	\$38,500
	Job Readiness Coordinator (for-profit)	Assess job readiness skills of participants. Teach job readiness and job search skills.	\$32,000
SAN JOSÉ	Social Service Manager (public agency)	Provide technical resources. Initiate recommendations for programs to meet community needs.	\$34,200
	Supervisor, Program Performance (for-profit)	Supervise the day-to-day operations of an employment services program.	\$61,261-\$74,729

Desired Qualifications Vary, Too

Interviews with managers revealed that there was some variation in the qualifications sought in an effective worker. All agreed that the complexity of services in the field calls for a well-trained workforce that can handle the demands of a pressurized, often-changing environment. For-profit executives emphasized business acumen as a desired quality, while community-based organizations felt that motivation and desire to help were equally as, if not more, important. Small community- and faith-based organizations that target distinct community populations, such as low-income immigrant populations, placed a heavier premium on workers' connection to the community and passion for helping residents.

The integration of Employment Service into the WIA One-Stops meant that frontline workers from private contracted nonprofit and for-profit agencies found themselves working side by side with the public-agency employees who had previously worked in unemployment (ES) offices. For public-agency staff, this was often a significant shift in job description from one in which they had relatively little customer interaction except to explain program rules, make sure that

appropriate documents were signed, and monitor clients for compliance to one in which they must deal more closely with customers' needs.

PRODUCING RAPID RESULTS AND QUALITY SERVICES IN AN UNSTABLE FUNDING ENVIRONMENT

Pay-For-Performance: Stringent Contract Targets and Individualized Frontline Goals

Whether a union, nonprofit, for-profit, community-based entity, or community college, all workforce organizations—and the frontline workers they employ—operate in a performance-based environment. JTPA introduced the first pay-for-performance contracts to the workforce development field, and performance-based contracting (PBC) gained momentum throughout the 1990s. Most states now utilize PBC with a focus on pay for performance; however, contracts often come with long waits for pay and short-term year-to-year funding, causing organizations to operate on thin margins in highly volatile, fiscally risky environments. Private foundation funders have also become more focused on the importance of outcomes, and many practitioners have themselves embraced the idea of continuous improvement and using outcomes to improve performance. To manage and meet performance requirements, organizations often assigned department, team, and even individual performance targets.

Interviews with managers across the three cities revealed a similar commitment to outcomes management; however, in focus groups and discussions with frontline workers, we sometimes found little understanding or buy-in—a critical part of the continuous improvement loop—to organizational performance goals. Strictly defined performance goals posed a particular concern for many workers, who felt that such obligations placed too much emphasis on getting people through the program quickly rather than providing them with quality service. Even workers who received incentives tied to performance goals were concerned that service to job seekers was becoming something of a “numbers game.” Because of performance targets, some staff often felt pressure to engage customers in ways that allowed them to meet their numbers but would not ultimately benefit a customer who was not yet ready to get and keep a job.

Push for Rapid Job Placement May Sacrifice Quality Service

The conflict that staff identified between meeting contract goals and fulfilling customer needs not only related to the performance-based environment but also to the emphasis on getting clients quickly into jobs, an approach characteristic of the nation’s approach to welfare reform.

From its inception, the welfare system has served as the primary safety net for women raising children on their own. During the 1970s and 1980s, with the growth in the number of divorces, female-headed households, and unmarried mothers, the AFDC rolls grew as well. By the 1980s moving welfare recipients—famously portrayed by President Reagan as “welfare queens”—into work was a focus of national debate. In the 1992 election, Bill Clinton ran and won on a pledge to “end welfare as we know it.” A year later, the results of an eight-year evaluation of JTPA’s effectiveness commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor, while in fact showing variation in performance across the participating sites, solidified an emerging consensus that job training programs simply did not work. When President Clinton signed PRWORA into law, he severely

limited training and education opportunities and offered instead short-term job readiness, job search classes, and unpaid work experience.

With the passage of WIA two years later, the influence of “Work First” was seen in the sequence of services offered through the One-Stops, and this “rapid attachment” approach became the primary strategy that states and locales began to employ in their workforce systems. In 2006, President Bush signed legislation that reauthorized TANF and tightened the focus on work. This placed pressure on states, workforce organizations, and frontline staff to get more welfare recipients into work quickly.

For many frontline workers, this movement to rapid attachment caused a high level of frustration because high-need clients required more support than workers could provide. Many felt that as job-ready welfare recipients moved off welfare and into work, those remaining in the system were typically the hardest-to-place individuals, leaving workers with a sense of helplessness. This was particularly true in the case of customers with critical barriers to work—domestic-violence or substance-abuse situations or a lack of child care and means of transportation. Serving customers who were mandated to engage in job activities but did not have the necessary supports in place to remain employed left many workers feeling pessimistic about job success. One frontline worker described this oft-seen situation for job seekers who are not quite prepared for employment: *“The first day of work comes, child care is not there, and the customer calls out. Now they’ve lost an opportunity to improve their lifestyle, and you’re back at square one.”*

This predicament is not unique to those working with welfare recipients. Frontline staff we surveyed indicated that many WIA customers face the same barriers as TANF customers. Frontline workers saw some dislocated job seekers take advantage of self-directed job search activities but felt that many WIA customers, particularly in Philadelphia, were not job ready and needed staff-intensive assistance to find work.

The demands of customers themselves further overwhelm staff, who must deal with job seekers’ sometimes unrealistic goals for employment and salaries and/or lack of employability. Customers’ fears of leaving familiar territory and expectations that workers can solve all of their problems even when the customers do not fulfill their own obligations (e.g., missing a job interview) were reported as the cause of setbacks. A worker described this experience: *“A customer gets a job and has child care in place and calls me the morning that she was supposed to turn up to work and says, ‘Well, I don’t have child care.’ Yes, you did, the money was there. You just realized this morning that you have to be at work at 7:00, but the daycare doesn’t open till 7:30. You knew you had to be at work at 7:00 on Friday.”*

Nevertheless, working directly with customers and helping them to have a better life was described by frontline staff as the most enjoyable aspect of working in the field. Staff took particular pleasure in inspiring customers to change their mind-sets, helping them to see that gaining a skill, getting a job, and keeping that job could be viable options. Customers’ “success stories” were a big factor in workers’ ability to remain committed to their jobs: *“You walk down the street and meet somebody that you serviced two years back, and they tell you, ‘I left that job, but I got a better one with benefits, and I’m about to buy a house’—that’s the stuff that then it’s like, okay, my frustration every day is worth it.”*

Erratic Funding Leads to Staff Instability

Funding for training and employment has steadily decreased as the nation pushes through its Work First agenda. In one estimate, the federal Department of Labor cut training dollars for JTPA and WIA by 33 percent between 1985 and 2003.⁹ WIA funding for adults decreased another 8.4 percent between fiscal years 2002 and 2006. In the early part of this decade, training and employment funding for welfare recipients under TANF was just half of what it was in the mid-1990s under the JOBS program.¹⁰ This steady decline in funding, juxtaposed with increasing business demands for skilled job candidates, creates a greater challenge for workforce organizations and frontline workers. Capturing multiple funding sources is now a key strategy for ensuring organizational stability; many workforce organizations interviewed for this report had developed a mix of funding so that no single cutback could be too damaging.

The erratic nature of funding was cited as a primary issue for attracting, retaining, and advancing frontline workers. In San José, for example, program allocations were determined only on a year-to-year basis, often with significant variations in funding each year. The city's Department of Economic Development staff at the One-Stop had a more unique employment situation: Due to a freeze in city hiring, many workers were brought on as temporary contract staff, with a two-year time limit. Once the time limit was over, staff were not able to reapply for positions for a certain amount of time. This led to periods of staff shuffling as workers whose time limits were up left and new staff replacements were hired and trained.

Both San José and Houston have experienced cuts in recent years, but Philadelphia's recent \$20 million cut in welfare-to-work employment and training programs in 2006 created a rapid "domino effect" in contract and staffing reductions throughout the city. One large nonprofit agency laid off 84 caseworkers, job coaches, and job developers. Layoffs in Philadelphia have been consistent not only across all of the organizations contacted for this study but also across the training provider organizations that relied on WIA vouchers to support programs.

The decreasing, inconsistent nature of local funding contributes to a number of other service delivery issues: limited time for planning and program ramp-up, limited staff development opportunities, and uncertain long-term futures for frontline staff—leading, unsurprisingly, to low morale and feelings of underappreciation as well as expanded workloads for employees who remain. "More staff" was repeated often by both managers and frontline workers as a factor that would help workers to do their jobs better, but short-term contracts create turnover among workers, who must always keep an eye open for the next thing rather than invest themselves in their organizations and their current positions, contributing in Philadelphia to the continual turnover: *"I'm going on three years, and I feel like a senior because there are faces there that I don't even know names to. People that started with me are no longer there, but I think also that*

⁹ Spence, Robin and Brendan Kiel. 2003. *Skilling the American Workforce: On the Cheap: Ongoing Shortfalls in Federal Funding for Workforce Development*. Washington, DC: The Workforce Alliance.

¹⁰ Rubenstein, Gwen and Andrea Mayo. 2006. *Training Policy in Brief: An Overview of Federal Workforce Development Policies*. Washington, DC: The Workforce Alliance.

the people that survive in this field are people that really want to do it. Because if you really don't want to do it, you're not gonna stay very long."

Organizations in Philadelphia were most concerned about retaining staff, partly in the face of the city's recent program modifications and funding cuts. Managers felt that, due to frequent layoffs, staff tended to jump from agency to agency, a situation that created a recycling of old (and not necessarily the most qualified) staff. One for-profit agency recruited staff from outside the field—looking for transferable skills from other industries—to avoid hiring staff who moved from program to program.

FINDING THE SKILLS TO MEET NEW DEMANDS

Recruitment and Retention of Quality Frontline Staff Is Sometimes Difficult

Unstable funding environments were not, however, the only contributing factor in attracting and retaining quality frontline staff. In interviews with executives, such factors as professionalism, hard skills like writing and computer proficiency, an outcomes orientation, and cultural competency came up as the qualities most in need of improvement among some frontline workers. While managers acknowledged that staff were well intentioned and dedicated, they raised concerns about their readiness to manage increasingly demanding and, in some cases, new roles.

To find appropriate frontline worker candidates, organizations used similar recruitment methods (advertising, online job postings, local colleges, etc.), although each city seemed to rely on a particular source. Managers in Houston used their own pool of customers as a primary source of qualified candidates; in San José, some staff hired as long-term temporary contract staff had been dislocated from other industries, where cutbacks created a rich pool of candidates who had bachelor's and master's degrees, as well as industry know-how in such areas as finance. In Philadelphia, managers relied heavily on referrals of candidates from existing staff—some even offered a “finder's fee” for workers if their referrals turned into hires. Many agreed with one Philadelphia executive's sentiment that there is an urgent need for more candidates who have a postsecondary education.

In fact, the quality of the frontline workforce was more of a pressing issue in Philadelphia than in San José and Houston. Houston managers made relatively few complaints about the quality of private agency staff, and WIA managers in San José were generally pleased with the overall quality of their highly educated, often multilingual, and cross-sector experienced staff. In contrast, some managers in Philadelphia (particularly those in smaller nonprofit organizations) lamented the fact that frontline staff sometimes had barriers to work that mirrored those of the customers they served—a lack of soft skills, child-care issues, and inadequate technical skills, for example. Others identified a particular challenge in recruiting minority staff for senior management positions. As the cities' ethnic and racial makeup evolves, many executives—in all three cities—perceived a growing need for increased cultural competencies as well.

Managers in various organizations expressed some level of frustration that workers who had been in the field for many years—moving from program to program in various iterations of the evolving system—tended to be less willing to “roll with the punches” compared with staff newer to the discipline. In particular, Employment Service staff were frequently labeled as inflexible, even by other ES staff. But while ES workers were sometimes labeled as rigid and unmotivated, their years of experience seemed to give them a deeper understanding of the field and their local workforce system that was not shared by other staff. Some ES workers were able to compare and contrast current programs with older versions, identifying elements that in their opinion were more or less effective—group intake over one-on-one assessment, for example. These workers themselves were disgruntled by their inability to voice input in local decision-making about program flow and procedures.

Despite these differences, there were several common staff retention issues across the cities. During most interviews, managers indicated that the highest turnover was in positions that had high employer interface and performance targets (job developers, employment specialists, etc.). Many felt the reason was that these positions had unforgiving placement goals, and, in an increasingly outcomes-focused system, these staff people were under considerable and constant pressure to place people in employment. With the associated financial penalties that agencies faced if goals were not met, these jobs were among the hardest in which to both find and keep talented staff. An additional retention issue concerned educational and specialized or certified staff positions, such as social workers and behavioral specialists. Some executives theorized that these workers leave the field because their qualifications enable them to find higher-paying jobs elsewhere.

Focus on Dual Customers Means Frontline Workers Must Develop New Skills

Another complex set of skills is required in the face of today's growing focus on economic development and the push for workers to cater to the "demand side" of workforce development. Whether concerned with poor families, the needs of returning veterans, or those held back by racism and discrimination, the workforce development field has strong roots in the servicing of individuals looking for a way out of poverty. Many frontline workers interviewed for this report were drawn to the field out of a desire to assist job seekers, but they are now required to develop a proficiency in engaging businesses as well.

This idea that workforce development is about more than connecting disadvantaged people to jobs began to emerge with the rise of Japan as a major economic power. In an attempt to tie training more closely to employer needs, JTPA established Private Industry Councils (PICs) made up of business and industry leaders. These boards were replaced under WIA by industry-led Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) responsible for providing strategic leadership on workforce issues for states, regions, and local areas, furthering the idea that the workforce system has a dual customer base—job seekers on the supply side and employers on the demand side.

In Houston, the idea of the dual customer is reflected in its separation of employer and job seeker services, while work²future staff in San José have focused on labor market analysis and economic development to guide training in business-demanded career clusters. In Pennsylvania, the Department of Labor and Industry created an Employer Advisory Council for Workforce Development (EAC), an employer-driven partnership with government and social service agencies that works to improve the local labor pool. Key to state and city workforce development strategies are industry partnerships—collaborations among multiple employers to improve the competitiveness of company clusters that produce similar products or services and share critical human resources, infrastructure, and/or retention and recruitment needs.¹¹

¹¹ Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board. Retrieved 6/07 from www.pwib.org.

With local and regional efforts to be more demand-driven, managers we surveyed noted that it can be quite difficult to find and train workers to cater to businesses. Proficiency in engaging businesses requires workers to understand the language of commerce and to develop a sales-driven approach. Managers looked to people with sales or business backgrounds who were already comfortable working in this environment and noted that workers who have had no prior sales-related experience often felt uncomfortable engaging employers directly.

For those organizations that have one person interfacing with both customers, the issue is finding the right skills mix: compassion for the job seeker and sales orientation toward the employer. One for-profit executive suggested that staff with “good hearts” tended to focus on the few customers that were doing really well and ignored the majority who needed intensive assistance. This underscored the executive’s assertion that a more important qualification for company success is “an appreciation for contract performance.”

STRENGTHENING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FRONTLINE WORKERS: THE FIELD'S RESPONSE

In the three cities reviewed for this report, we found that both oversight agencies and service-provider organizations have taken steps to strengthen the skills of frontline worker through training and development activities. In Houston, the National Workforce Institute (NWI) offers public sector practitioners skills-building and certification opportunities in partnership with the Houston-Galveston Area Council, the local WIB. In Philadelphia, both the Commonwealth's Department of Public Welfare (DPW) and the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry offer trainings to develop frontline staff competencies in key areas that include case management and job development. With the rollout of EARN Centers, PWDC, the oversight agency, has provided staff training in job development, case management and other relevant skills. The Department of Labor and Industry implemented a statewide initiative in partnership with Pennsylvania State University to certify frontline staff, One-Stop centers, and local WIBs in each workforce area. In San José, the Institute for Business Process recently enrolled all staff in training to become certified Global Career Development Facilitators (GCDFs), making the commitment to 120 hours of training in 12 areas of competency for each staff participant.

Nationally, the GCDF is one of three certification initiatives—the Certified Workforce Development Professional (CWDP) and Dynamic Works' National Workforce Professional are the other two—that have taken hold and often anchor local certification initiatives. While each is unique in delivery and focus, all require candidates to supplement set levels of formal education with documented knowledge and ability in a number of programmatic and operational topics, such as the framework of the workforce development system, communication, technology, program management, and meeting the needs of the business customer.

Table 4

**EXAMPLES OF COMPETENCIES REQUIRED
BY NATIONAL CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS**

LEVEL	COMPETENCY
Core	Interpersonal Relations
	Job Search Skills
	Introduction to the Workforce Development System
	Customer Service
	Communication
	Technology
Intermediate	Conflict Management
	Case Management
	An In-Depth Look at WIA
	Knowledge of Business Development
	Performance Measures and Standards
Advanced	Building Partnerships
	Understanding the WIB
	One-Stop Management
	Contracting

Coupled with national certification programs, customized regional efforts to standardize performance and to professionalize the field are burgeoning around the country. Several statewide certification and credentialing programs for frontline workers—in Maryland, Missouri and New York, for example—in general workforce development and specific competencies have been implemented in recent years.

At the provider level, executives interviewed agreed that training for staff is needed and essential, but across organizations there was differing capacity to provide such opportunities. Training and professional development ranged from ad hoc reviews of key program functions, such as case management and job development, to full-blown certification programs. Distinctions in training and support could be made across organizations by type and size. Large, stable organizations were able to provide in-house training activities and other resources for staff. One national for-profit had its own team of training and quality assurance staff that assisted local managers and frontline staff. Another large, unionized nonprofit instituted an in-house “university” to provide training on basic office skills, programmatic content, and quality-of-life issues, such as stress reduction. The agency also offered “deeper staff investment,” such as tuition reimbursement, on a case-by-case basis. Conversely, small, community-based organizations sometimes struggled to offer training and were less prepared to handle the loss in staff time when training took place—whether in-house or as part of a local area initiative.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of the challenges faced by frontline workers and the organizations that employ them stem from policies that have implications for the strength and effectiveness of the workforce field as a whole. In some places change is under way. A new emphasis on career pathways is gaining momentum; community colleges, community-based organizations, and local One-Stop systems are developing partnerships that more effectively meet employers' needs; some states and locales are also moving to longer-term contracts. More stable funding, flexibility to design and operate programs that meet the needs of disadvantaged job seekers, and a more integrated and rational funding stream are all strategies that could strengthen services to job seekers and employers alike.

An array of organizations are working to bring about such changes. Locally, workforce coalitions made up of groups of providers—such as the New York City Employment and Training Coalition, the Denver Employment Alliance and the Massachusetts Commonwealth Coalition—have sprung up to advocate for improvements in local policy and implementation. In an intensely competitive field, these coalitions represent an increasing awareness of the importance for organizations of working together around common goals and interests. At the national level, The Workforce Alliance, Inc. (TWA), brings together “community-based organizations, community colleges, unions, business leaders, and local officials advocating for public policies that invest in the skills of America’s workers.”¹² Many of these efforts cut across the traditional organizational and programmatic silos in the field, bringing together workers and leaders from public agencies, private nonprofits, community and economic development organizations, unions, and community colleges—excellent groundwork for collaboration to make the system work for both job seekers and the frontline workers who serve them.

At the same time, there are several additional actions that could bring focus to improving frontline workers through 1) supporting the continuing education and professional development of frontline workers and 2) attracting new talent to the field.

SUPPORTING THE CONTINUING EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF FRONTLINE WORKERS

For frontline workers, national associations, training, and certification and credentialing programs have begun to fill a gap in opportunities for skills development and proficiency, ongoing knowledge of the field, and sharing of best practices. These efforts have set in motion a move toward creating a professional identity for frontline workers, building cohesion, and, ultimately, strengthening the field’s ability to meet the needs of families and children.

¹² Retrieved from <http://www.workforcealliance.org>.

Develop a Network of Training and Professional Development Associations and Institutes

With the growth in the number of states, regions, and organizations interested in providing professional development opportunities for staff, a national network of training and professional development institutes, workforce-related associations, and other agencies would serve to build a nationwide platform for professionalizing the field and advocating for frontline staff.

Collaboration among such agencies would strengthen local efforts. A key component of this network might be an online resource dedicated to the day-to-day work of employment and training frontline workers. This site would house a variety of critical information and user-friendly tools and tips for working effectively and dealing with program-specific issues that could build a community of frontline workers—including those in community colleges, grassroots organizations, state agencies, rural towns, and urban cities.

Support Professional Development Aimed at CBO Employees

Employment advancement for disadvantaged workers and professional development of workers in community-based organizations may well dovetail in some urban areas. In Philadelphia, many executives felt that staff, particularly junior staff, often faced the same barriers to successful employment as the customers they served. Compounding this problem was the fact that many of the city's nonprofit workforce providers had few resources to attract qualified workers or to train and develop current staff. In addition, the city itself—given its higher poverty rates—had a smaller pool of qualified candidates from which to recruit.

This condition is not unique to Philadelphia CBOs. An analysis—based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS)—found that nationally, a significant proportion of individuals working in the nonprofit sector faced one or more barriers to employment—received public assistance or attended a GED class, for example—and that across each of the potential barriers to employment, nonprofit organizations were significantly more likely to employ both underskilled and potentially higher-need individuals than those without these needs.

These initial findings, along with the anecdotal information collected in interviews in Philadelphia, justify the potential benefit of an in-depth study of how nonprofits can better hire, retain, and support under-skilled employees. This study would serve as a starting point for the development of strategies to help community-based workforce development agencies train and enhance the skills of their workers, creating career paths for disadvantaged workers while strengthening services.

Attracting New Talent to the Field

There has been a great push in recent years for the nonprofit sector to respond to the impending deficit in leadership—in part due to baby-boomer retirements—and the need to attract and train new talent to fill the expected gaps. An estimated 640,000 new leaders must be developed within the sector; by 2016 as many as 80,000 new senior managers will be needed each year.¹³ Further fueling this leadership deficit are such factors as the lack of intermediary organizations needed to

¹³ Tierney, Thomas J. March 2006. "The Nonprofit Sector's Leadership Deficit." The Bridgespan Group.

support and train nonprofit managers, nonprofits' limited resources to develop their managers internally, and the sector's lack of management education.¹⁴

According to many senior executives we interviewed, recent college graduates who enter the field tend to remain for just a short period of time—a year or two. Indeed, many social service professions attract eager graduates who want to “give back” and make a difference, but studies show that with increasing student loan and consumer debt, graduates are choosing jobs that come with higher salaries.

Establish Fellowships

Because of the recruitment struggle facing the entire sector, the workforce development field must find its own response and strategies for infusing new talent. One idea for attracting talent and increasing awareness and preparation for the field is the establishment of two-year fellowships for college graduates, seniors reentering the workforce, or experienced professionals from other fields.

Both recent grads and experienced workers have much to offer, and workforce development organizations can capitalize on their knowledge and capabilities. One model for attracting members of these groups is the highly successful “Teach for America.” A similar program, “Jobs for America,” could recruit workers for two-year fellowships in public and private workforce development agencies. Short-term employment would provide mutual benefits: Fellows would impart new energy and knowledge and in turn learn about the workforce development field and its career prospects. On the other end of the spectrum, many seasoned, experienced workers seek second careers or part-time work. Senior Corps, the federal community-service program for Americans over the age of 55, connects 500,000 individuals to opportunities. The number of people over the age of 55 who still work is estimated to jump by 11 million in the next eight years. As employers prepare for the shortage in workers when baby boomers retire, experienced workers who want to work become attractive staffing options.

Spur Development of Academic Workforce Development Certificate and Degree Programs

Few formal educational opportunities exist for students at the undergraduate or graduate level to learn the skills or develop an understanding of the multiple disciplines that make up the workforce field. Workforce professionals receive a smattering of knowledge and skills, often taught across various departments. Unlike the community development field, for example, few graduates leave formal educational programs knowing that the workforce field exists or that there may be interesting and challenging careers to pursue. Developing such certificate and degree programs could provide a bridge into the field for a new generation of leaders.

¹⁴ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Whether at a large nonprofit in Philadelphia, a faith-based organization in Houston, or a government agency in San José, frontline workers play a critical role in the delivery of services to business customers and to job seekers, many of whom are unskilled, inexperienced, and in need of direction to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. Frontline staff work with customers from the initial point of contact to retention months after job placement. In between, they discern employability, offer motivation, identify and build skills for employment, and identify and address barriers to employment. Increasingly, workers must also reach out to employers, set up interviews, coach candidates, deal with placements that don't work out, and follow business trends that could result in jobs for their customers—all within the context of the policy-driven and outcomes-oriented contractual environment in which they operate.

Frontline workers are at the heart of workforce organizations' effectiveness; the importance of this cannot be overestimated. This report begins a discussion of the lives of frontline workers in the field today; our hope is that this will initiate an ongoing examination of the impact of conditions in the field on frontline workers' quality of life and the ways in which the field can support continuous improvement in frontline workers' effectiveness.